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MISSION TO KILIMANJARO THE FOUNDING HISTORY OF A CATHOLIC MISSION IN EASTERN AFRICA

Introduction

In June 1914, Archbishop Alexander Le Roy, C.S.Sp. began the preface for the reprint of his magnificent opus, *Au Kilima-Ndjaro* (To Kilimanjaro) with these words:

The pages you are about to read contain the report of a voyage of exploration to Kilimanjaro (East Africa). The voyage was undertaken in 1890 in order to study then unknown nations so as to found new centers of evangelization.¹

Le Roy is clear about the purpose of his book. In the Preface, he reminds the readers that, initially, the book appeared serially in articles written for the journal, “*Les Missions Catholiques*,” (Catholic Missions) of Lyons and then compiled into a single volume. These articles were destined for benefactors, associates, and friends of the mission. Le Roy wrote exceptionally well; he was a gifted and engaging writer.

The book has twenty-eight chapters divided into three parts: Part I: “From Zanzibar to Kilimanjaro”; Part II: “In Kilimanjaro”; and Part III: “From Kilimanjaro to Zanzibar.” Each chapter is furnished with an initial summary, in a style that makes the reader anticipate what is to come. Le Roy himself wrote a Postscript nearly forty years after the 1890 exploration, by which time, regrettably, many of his colleagues in the adventure had departed from this world.

Le Roy was not just a good writer; he was also an accomplished geographer, botanist, anthropologist, and artist. The book is not about him, but about the feasibility studies carried out by a team of three brave Spiritan missionaries, Mgr. Raoul de Courmont, Fr. August Gommenginger, and the then Fr. Alexander Le Roy in view of opening up new mission stations in the interior of East Africa. Le Roy stands out because of his missionary instinct, human genius, sense of humor, and deep convictions - qualities that are key to understanding the book. Elsewhere, he gives a hint about his method.

*the exploration took
place just five years after
the infamous Berlin
Conference (1884–5)*

A missionary is supposed, “by his vocation, to know the physical geography of the countries he is evangelizing, which are the waterways, routes, pathways, means of communication, the obstacles, forests, deserts, and mountains. He is to study the general nature of the terrain, take account of the population density of any given location, and examine the relationships that link one people to another, one tribe to another, one family to another.”²

Le Roy admirably attends to these parameters and with disarming ease in the way he recounts events along the way. In addition, this method clearly distinguishes the missionary agenda from a colonial one. It is good to bear in mind that the exploration took place just five years after the infamous Berlin Conference (1884–5) that gave juridical status and recognition to the frenetic scramble for, and partitioning of, the African continent into spheres of influence among the major European powers. Le Roy and his colleagues were keenly aware of this political reality. They stubbornly chose to stick to their missionary agenda and avoid all that could compromise it.

Le Roy had an adventurous nature. As a young missionary in Zanzibar and Bagamoyo, he had already crisscrossed a good part of the Vicariate of Zanzibar scouting for new possibilities of expansion from these “mother” missions. His gaze was constantly fixed on the interior. By the time Bishop de Courmont decided to explore Kilimanjaro, Le Roy had accumulated a rich experience and knowledge of the terrain that became a huge asset for the team.

From Zanzibar to Kilimanjaro

Part I of the book offers rich background information about Kilimanjaro, “the mountain of water,” which hitherto had been a puzzle not only to coastal Arab and Swahili traders, explorers, travelers but also to geographers.

*The Anglican Church
Missionary Society paved
the way to Kilimanjaro
for Christian missionaries
from their base in
Mombasa in 1885*

Apart from the scientific interest and the build-up of intense political maneuvering towards the Berlin Conference, Kilimanjaro had also awakened missionary interest. The Anglican Church Missionary Society paved the way to Kilimanjaro for Christian missionaries from their base in Mombasa in 1885. Mgr. de Courmont who had been mulling over this project for some time, finally made up his mind in 1890.

From Zanzibar, the missionaries sailed to Mombasa where they arrived on 10 July and established an ad hoc logistical base on the outskirts of the town. Unfortunately, they could not leave from there as early as planned. The hiccup was mainly due to the difficulty in recruiting indispensable porters.

When they finally set out on 17 July, at nine o'clock in the morning, they were unequivocal about their destination and the purpose of the journey.

Our target was Kilimanjaro. From Mombasa the shortest route, and the one which most travelers had taken, was that through Taita. But water was very scarce at that time of year, moreover, the area has already been explored, and, with the possible exception of one particular point, it does not seem to offer opportunities for missionary work. To the south we have the Digo country, which has been very little studied. If we passed through it, we could finish that part of the journey at Vanga, and, from there go on to Sambara and Pare country, Lake Jipe and Taveta. Such a journey would be twice as long as the other route; but, in making it, we would have water and food for the caravan, and we would be able to see the different areas where, sooner or later, missions must be started.³

*he used pencil sketches to
immortalize landscapes,
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flowers, trees, people,
villages, rivers, mountains,
hills, artifacts, instruments,
utensils*

What follows in the first part of the book is the actual trek according to the itinerary described above. Le Roy was not an abstract writer. He knew his readers and wished to engage them in every possible way. Apart from writing, he used pencil sketches to immortalize landscapes, animals, insects, plants, flowers, trees, people, villages, rivers, mountains, hills, artifacts, instruments, utensils, etc. His fine eye captured little details shown in some drawings he made almost with photographic precision. On some occasions, he addressed himself directly to his public. "Reader, it is a big secret. However, if you promise me not to tell anybody. I can let you into my confidence..." He really wanted to capture their imagination and travel with them to exotic places where they had never been.

The missionaries saw a silhouette of Kilimanjaro for the first time as they were leaving the Pare mountains towards Lake Jipe. They saw it "unveiled" just before sunset on the eve of their departure for Taveta from the lakeside encampment. Le Roy was poetic.

What I was seeing was the sort of experience which you can never forget. There, before us, against a background of blue sky, the huge outline of the marvelous mountain stood out, as though it were the work of a vigorous artist. I could see two summits: the one on the left, somewhat rounded and dazzling in its brightness, which is called Kibo, the African giant, which raises its snow-covered head to more than 6,000 meters; the other one on the right, closer to us, jagged, dark, and rather frightening, with only a few white patches - this is Mawenzi which is only 5,300 meters above sea level, but which from Lake Jipe appeared to be as high as Kibo. Because of the position where I was, the plateau which links the two summits was practically invisible. I could not see any of the details of the landscape of the massif, neither forests, nor valleys, nor individual peaks. The two craters seemed to be supported by an enormous pedestal, formed into one by the flow of lava, as though to serve as candelabra lit in the course of centuries to the glory of the Creator. Alas! It is almost the only homage that he has received in these lands, and it has been given to him by his own hand.⁴

Part I of the book ends in Taveta where the missionary caravan camped for two days. This was a much-anticipated stop because of its proximity to Kilimanjaro. It was also a popular site “where all the Europeans camp.” Famous travelers and explorers passed through Taveta. Le Roy was proud to declare: “But we were the first Catholic missionaries and the first Frenchmen who had the honor of pitching our camp here.”⁵

In Kilimanjaro

Just before the missionaries left Mombasa for Kilimanjaro, Le Roy laid bare the details about their onward journey and the purpose of the exploration. The feasibility studies they were to carry out did not exclude other areas but Kilimanjaro remained their prime target. Therefore, part two of the book covers a range of elements of the missionaries’ program in Kilimanjaro in a very extensive and well-researched manner. Le Roy gives an update about this program:

We have now seen the most interesting and the most heavily populated districts of Chagga land: Marangu, Kilema, Kirua, Moshi, Uru, Kibosho, Machame,



The Gates of Kilema

Useri, and Rombo on the east. We did not go to Kibong'oto on the west but got reliable information on it: but we have yet to complete all the items in our program.⁶

If the missionaries' programme was rolling out as expected, it was partly due to the dedication and sacrifice of humble people like Nderingo, a young man from Kilema who asked to join the missionary caravan in Mombasa. In Le Roy's words, "It was Providence that had sent him to us missionaries."⁷ He became the right-hand man of the missionaries and he served in different capacities as a "guide, interpreter, and intelligence gatherer."⁸ He was a sort of a "hidden figure" considering the tenacious⁹ role he played in convincing the missionaries to visit Kilema, where the first mission station was eventually founded in Kilimanjaro. He provided them with unequalled loyalty of service all along. It was, thanks to Nderingo, that the missionaries met the first Chagga chief, Fumba, with whom Le Roy made the famous blood pact of brotherhood in Kilema.

He became the right-hand man of the missionaries and he served in different capacities as a "guide, interpreter, and intelligence gatherer"

The one-month period spent in Kilimanjaro was hectic but equally rewarding in many ways. To begin with, Mgr. de Courmont's most cherished wish became a reality when he celebrated Mass at the foot of Kilimanjaro on Assumption day, 15th August 1890. Then they were able to travel extensively around the mountain in the midst of Chagga wars and managed to spend countless hours of conversations with local chiefs and the local people. Some of these encounters helped to adjust their program taking into consideration the local reality. Writes Le Roy, "Our conversations with Mandara, as well as the knowledge we had acquired from other sources, had convinced us that

only by visiting the western side of the mountain could we claim to have explored Kilimanjaro thoroughly.”¹⁰ One of the items at the top of the missionaries’ agenda was to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Everyone was excited about this:

Mgr. de Courmont himself wanted to go further up “as high as one can go.” We were there at the foot of the biggest altar which God has given to this continent: we were under an obligation to go and offer the holy sacrifice of the Mass there and pray for the whole of Africa. “*Introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam* (I shall go in to the altar of God, to God who brings joy to my youth).”¹¹

The climb to the “roof of Africa” was not just a religious pilgrimage; it was partly an adventure but also a veritable scientific expedition. As they climbed, Le Roy observed, compared and contrasted the geographical, botanical, and zoological data he had gathered about the massif. He also collected a variety of flora and fauna specimens destined for scientific research.

As they climbed, Le Roy observed, compared and contrasted the geographical, botanical, and zoological data he had gathered about the massif

There is no doubt that he had taken time to gather a lot of information about Chagga land and its population. He was very aware that they were not going to reinvent the wheel. That is why he alluded to stories, reports, and writings of travelers, other missionaries, coastal Arab and Swahili traders, but he did not feel obliged to follow their views. The reader will also find later some of Le Roy’s accounts in Part III of the book, which could be compared to field work study carried out by a serious researcher.

The convergence of two key factors did not make it easy to choose a secure location for the founding of a first mission in Kilimanjaro. On the one hand, there was political posturing over Chagga land among local chiefs in their struggle for hegemonic control over smaller chiefdoms. On the other hand, it was the beginning of the establishment of German colonial rule. However, the timing of their visit during the period of Chagga wars did not prevent the missionaries from pushing ahead with their agenda, as is evident in Part II of the book.

From Kilimanjaro to Zanzibar

Part III of the book covers the return journey down to the coast at the beginning of September 1890. The missionaries opted for a completely different itinerary back,

which was rather challenging as they would be obliged to pass through unchartered territories. Nevertheless, it was a worthy experience because it fitted well with the overall objective of the exploration. While on the way, Mgr. de Courmont would seek in advance the guarantee of protection of the planned missionary caravan to Kilimanjaro from local chiefs. Another spin off benefit is that the experience gained during the journey would be useful for the logistical preparation of the new caravan.

A decisive duty imposed itself upon the missionaries before they started off on their return journey. They had to decide on the place where the first Catholic mission in Kilimanjaro would be founded. This was not a straightforward decision. They carefully thought about it, asked for advice and took time to pray about it. Finally, Mgr. de Courmont gave the instructions. Fr. Gommenginger, the would-be founder of the mission, was to stay behind in the meantime under the protection of M. d'Eltz.¹² Depending on the political situation, Plan A was to establish the first mission at Machame, plan B at Kilema. Moshi was eliminated from the choice, perhaps due to the presence of the Anglican Mission. Bishop de Courmont and Le Roy were to take the road down to the coast following a different itinerary, which would allow them to explore lesser known territories and to encounter different populations on the way. They aimed to reach Bagamoyo to the south east via Mandera in a timely fashion.

They had to decide on the place where the first Catholic mission in Kilimanjaro would be founded

The missionaries spent 4 days at the government post in Lower Arusha, courtesy of M. d'Eltz, in preparation for the long trek towards the coast. On 13th September, the missionaries had reorganized the caravan and started the journey towards Ruvu where a touching scene took place just before they crossed the river. It was time to bid farewell to the good company of M. d'Eltz, Dr. Baxter,¹³ Father Auguste Gommenginger, the two Catholic children¹⁴ and Nderingo. On 14th September they reached the foot of the Pare mountains on the western side. Remember that they had already travelled on the opposite side of the same mountains from Gonja on the way up to Lake Jipe in the north. Now they had to negotiate their way southward for five good days, passing through dense, thorny bush-land, between five to eight hours a day to navigate around the Pare mountains. The Maasai seem to have been unique travelers in that lonely land.¹⁵

Le Roy dedicates all of chapter 26 to the Maasai, looking at almost all the aspects of their lives from birth to death

Le Roy dedicates all of chapter 26 to the Maasai, looking at almost all the aspects of their lives from birth to death. As they continued along, the missionaries kept coming across people from other ethnic groups such as the Zigua and Ndorobo hitherto unknown to them. They had an eventful encounter with the famous Sambara chief, Semboja.¹⁶ The missionaries' party moved on. They marched southward on the plain along the western side of the Usambara mountains past Korogwe to Maurwi. The people they encountered, for example, the Bondei, carried out farming activities, used money, dressed in linen and spoke Swahili. Islam was already present in these areas given the proximity to the coast, but it had not taken root. It is interesting that Le Roy continually saw the possibility for missionary work among different ethnic groups which they met. Personally, he felt that missionary work could have been successful among these people but for the fact that there was lack of personnel and funds to achieve it.

To reach Bagamoyo they could either take the Pangani or the Zigua route. They chose the latter and parted ways with the group of Salim.¹⁷ Here is the reason for the option which they took:

While the route to Zigua is much longer, it permitted us to learn about a region, still little known, even though it is not far from the coast. Moreover, we would have the pleasure of meeting en route Selemani's brother, one of the big men of the region, and, further on, to visit our mission at Mandera.¹⁸

The pause at Mandera was brief. The traverse through the Doe country brought sad memories to Le Roy who, in the company of a colleague during one of his previous exploratory voyages in the interior, had witnessed one of their porters being literally eaten with "pepper and salt" in front of them. That is why he called the Doe, "a land of hills and cannibalism."¹⁹

Le Roy who, in the company of a colleague during one of his previous exploratory voyages in the interior, had witnessed one of their porters being literally eaten with "pepper and salt" in front of them

Bagamoyo at last! The missionary caravan crossed the river on a boat and soon reached the outskirts of Bagamoyo. The coconut palms of the mission beckoned the termination of their long and arduous journey to and from Kilimanjaro. The scene of the triumphant entry was carefully prepared. The porters knew how best to stage and dramatize the scene not only by the noise of rifle shots but also in the way they donned traditional accoutrements which gave them an impressive exotic look before the mesmerized local

population. Le Roy captured this memorable moment:

We entered the mission majestically and slowly. Even Mgr. de Courmont had to participate. He was at the very end of the procession, holding his pastoral staff in his hands. I mean of course the pastoral staff that the chief of Same gave him. Then, at a given signal, these valiant porters, who had tried our patience during the three months of the journey, but to whom now everything is forgiven, broke into a Maasai song, with tremendous success, which gained them enormous admiration from the passers-by. People ran up, rifle shots were fired, different bursts of cheering mingled, the bells were rung, the chapel was opened, and we gave our thanks to God The journey was over.²⁰

Forty Years After

Le Roy added a postscript later to inform the readers about the outcome of the expedition they made to Kilimanjaro. He looked back with a sense of satisfaction and gratitude. The success of the courageous attempt to found a Catholic Mission in “a distant region of Africa” was a dream come true. The update is about the people mentioned in the previous pages and about places and events that were linked to the entire account. He comments:

The success of the courageous attempt to found a Catholic Mission in “a distant region of Africa” was a dream come true

If we count up the steps taken by a missionary in an unevangelized land, some are fruitless, some are wasted, but this cannot be said of all of them. He will experience sufferings, sometimes from things, sometimes from beasts, sometimes from human beings, sometimes from all of these together. St. Paul made this point in his own time. But when, later on, he looks back on those unexplored roads which he watered with his sweat, he sees light breaking through the darkness which had reigned there. He forgets the miseries of the past and only remembers the delightful experiences, he has only smiles for his present situation, and he steps forward into the future, happy with his lot and profoundly grateful to God.²¹

Overall, it must be agreed that the book is permeated with great missionary fervor which could still be contagious in our day, notwithstanding the lapse of time. The story ends with a passionate appeal worth heeding: This (evangelization) is our work: come, young men, replace the

missionaries grown old, who, before they fall asleep, seek new hands to whom they can entrust their flag. Glory to God! And peace to men of good will!²²

*come, young men, replace
the missionaries grown
old, who, before they fall
asleep, seek new hands to
whom they can entrust
their flag*

Today, this book can rightly be considered an artifact of great missionary and historical value. It records unique raw information about people and places hard to source elsewhere. The book is of particular interest to us missionaries of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritans), because it creates a sort of historical flashback. However, this is not said with the intention of evoking feelings of nostalgia, but rather it is hoped that the reader will be edified and draw wisdom from this great missionary story as a fitting tribute to those who made personal sacrifices for this mission.

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Endnotes

¹Le Roy, *Au Kilimanjaro* "Author's Preface." The English translation of this book, titled, *Mission to Kilimanjaro*, is in press and should be published early 2020.

²In "Exploration et mission au Zanguebar," 8.

³*Mission to Kilimanjaro*, chapter 2.

⁴Chapter 14.

⁵Chapter 15.

⁶Chapter 20.

⁷Chapter 16.

⁸Chapter 16.

⁹Chapter 16.

¹⁰Chapter 18.

¹¹Chapter 19. The Tridentine Mass started thus.

¹²"For us, M. d'Eltz was far from being an unknown quantity. He was born in Poland, of an aristocratic family, which has some members living in France. Much of his youth had been spent in Russia, in the Ural Mountains and Siberia. Later on, he came to Africa, and, when at Bagamoyo, we had had different occasions to benefit from his straightforwardness, his trustworthiness, and the integrity which marked him as a true gentleman. He had

often urged Mgr. de Courmont to commit himself to founding a mission on Kilimanjaro; but circumstances had made him postpone the project, so, as it seemed today that it must be realized, M. d'Eltz was particularly happy" (Chapter 17).

¹³An amicable volunteer at the Anglican mission in Moshi.

¹⁴Chapter 3 and Postscript.

¹⁵"The Maasai are the only people who travel in this lonely land, and they do not bother about paths. Wearing tough sandals made of cattle skin, and carrying a big spear in their hands, they travel like a romantic poet, without money or even a pocket. The only thing that they might fear would be what worried the people of ancient Gaul: the possibility that the sky might fall on the earth" (Chapter 25).

¹⁶Chapter 27.

¹⁷We accepted this (the request of some ivory traders from Pangani who had asked to join the missionary caravan) very readily, since among them we could find guides for this journey into the unknown and even an interpreter for dealing with the Maasai. This was a man called Salim, who had the devil's own daring, and an extraordinary glibness in speech (Chapter 25).

¹⁸Chapter 26.

¹⁹Chapter 28.

²⁰Chapter 28.

²¹Postscript.

²²Ibid.